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By Bruce G.
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"What's your blood-type, Bruce?" was the first thing that Jeffrey Combs said to me on the telephone. When I told him I didn't know, he said quietly, "I'm sure we can find out."

That's the kind of guy Combs is, maintaining a sense of humor about having become a horror star. Other actors work consistently in the genre—Julian Sands, Robert Englund, Bruce Campbell, to name a few—but Combs may come closest to being an old-fashioned genre specialist in the manner of Karloff, Lugosi, Cushing, and Lee. Whether digging up old friends in *RE-ANIMATOR* or playing against type as the heroic DR. MORDRID, the actor invests each of his roles with a classic theatrical flair, suggesting that he has inherited the mantle of the recently departed Vincent Price, along with a resemblance to the late Ralph Bates (DR. JEKYLL AND SISTER HYDE).

Although he seems more like a New York theatrical type than a California boy, Combs was actually born and brought up in the Golden State,



Above: Combs poses as his most famous character, Herbert West, along with Kathleen Kinmont as the titular BRIDE OF RE-ANIMATOR. Right: West and his assistant (Bruce Abbott) construct the bride.



FFREY COMBS

method actor delves beyond RE-ANIMATOR.

halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. "I didn't really grow up around the movie business," Combs explains. "L.A. is different from the rest of California. Where I grew up was rural, small town, quiet. It could have been in Ohio or New York. It could have been anywhere."

Combs very first screen appearance came in 1981 with a one-day job on *WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?* ("I had a little scene with John Cassavetes. He was a wonderful guy.") Many fans may not be aware that Combs also played a small role opposite Steve Martin in *THE MAN WITH TWO BRAINS* (1983). And wouldn't you know he was a doctor in that, too, assisting Martin in his operation on Kathleen Turner. "I think I'm one of the few people who can say that I shaved Kathleen Turner, but not where you'd think," Combs laughs.

As is obvious from his screen performances, Combs is a thoroughly trained stage performer. "I went to a lot of theatre schools, got a lot of training, did a lot of repertory where you do a different play every night. I took a lot of voice, movement, and acting classes. I did a lot of rep after I got out of school: in San Diego, the Mark Taper Forum, South Coast Repertory—just the whole theatre circuit."

In fact, Combs was in a play in Los Angeles when he got the part of Herbert West in the first *RE-ANIMATOR* (1985). "The casting director saw me and said, 'Hey, you want to come in and read for this?' At the time, you have to realize that this was not *RE-ANIMATOR* as we know it. This was *RE-ANIMATOR* with a small 'R.' So I went in and auditioned for Stuart [Gordon]. He liked me, and I got called back to

"Villains are more interesting, as Herbert West proves, Here's a guy we admire because, despite what we find disgusting about him, at least he doesn't give in."



Combs considers *FROM BEYOND*, his second foray into Lovecraftian territory with director Stuart Gordon, an effort unbalanced in favor of special effects.

read for the producer [Brian Yuzna]. The rest is splatter history."

Interestingly enough, Combs had not been at all familiar with Lovecraft's work before he did *RE-ANIMATOR*—although that isn't what he told the producers. "They would say, 'You know, this movie's based on H.P. Lovecraft,' and like any actor who wants a job, I said, 'Oh! Ah, sure!' I'd heard the name, but I didn't really

know his writings at all. But I went out and read quite a bit of it after that."

Combs had mixed emotions about his first experience with the 'splatter' genre. "I went through some quandaries," he admits. "I wondered, 'What is this?' Actually, when I first read the script for *RE-ANIMATOR*, I thought, 'Oh, god, this is quite strong. But I'll do it, because work is work, and no one will ever see it, anyway.' How

wrong can you be?"

Combs says that what he tried to do in *RE-ANIMATOR* was bring "back some of that style. All of those guys in the early horror films were stage-based. That's where that kind of grand attitude comes from—a little larger than life. A lot of actors don't have that sort of base. They just come in and don't kick it in the rear. It's very flattering to be compared to people like Vincent Price, Peter Cushing, and all those great actors."

Combs enjoys working with director Stuart Gordon because of Gordon's stage background. "He understands the process," Combs explains. "A lot of film directors don't really know how to talk to actors other than to say, 'Stand there,' or 'Can you say it louder and faster?' Stuart really knows how to get the detail. He can really base it in honest-to-goodness motivations and reality. Although it's fantastical, he likes to base it in fact. He's a great guy. We have a lot of good laughs."

Combs feels that his second Lovecraft film, *FROM BEYOND*, suffered from too many cuts—and not just those mandated by the MPAA to conform to an R-rating. "There were things cut out of it that shouldn't have been cut," Combs explains. "Little character bits. But it was also cut by the Ratings Board, and if you've seen the film you can understand why. It was pretty strong. But I felt like the balance was lost on that movie. It became too strongly oriented toward the effects. Stuart always has this great balance between the effects and the characters, but this got a little out of whack."

Combs has much higher praise for Gordon's version of *THE PIT AND THE PENDU-*



Combs shares a non-effects scene with *RE-ANIMATOR* co-star Barbara Crampton. "Character bits were cut out that shouldn't have been," he says.

LUM. "It's quite good," the actor enthuses. "For me, it's Stuart getting back to his original style. It's similar in style to *RE-ANIMATOR*. There's the humor, and there's the shock value there." Combs also feels that *BRIDE OF RE-ANIMATOR*, directed by Brian Yuzna, is at least as good as its predecessor. "There's a great sense of style," he says, "and if you can—pardon the pun—inject a little bit of humor into it, you can lift it beyond the genre."

When asked about the difference in the directing style of Yuzna and Gordon, Combs is diplomatic. "They're apples and oranges. Brian is a very good director. He has a good eye, a very clear concept of what he wants, and we have a good working relationship. He knows how to get coverage; he knows how to get the look and feel of the atmosphere that he wants. He knows that a strong story is very important. Of course, all this is true with Stuart, too, but they both have their strengths. I enjoy working with both of them. I wish they'd work together again."

Combs may get his wish, as Yuzna hopes to reassemble the original *RE-ANIMATOR* creative team for a second sequel, to be entitled either *BEYOND RE-ANIMATOR* or *HOUSE OF RE-ANIMATOR*. "What he would like to do is get Stuart Gordon back on board as director, Dennis Paoli back on board as screenwriter, myself, and hopefully Bruce [Abbott] and convey it that way—that the old magic is

back. It would be nice if all of that works out."

The genre tag brought by recognition from the *RE-ANIMATOR* films hasn't always provided the choicest roles or the most prestigious productions. Along the way, Combs has done a couple of flicks for ubiquitous low-budget movie-maker Fred Olen Ray. "I went in and met Fred," Combs recalls. "He said he had this project called *CYCLONE*. There wasn't a script yet, but would I be interested? I said sure. Actors like to work. Well...it's not that great of a movie, but I enjoyed working with Fred."

"*THE PHANTOM EMPIRE* is a whole story in itself," Combs adds. "He called me and said, 'Look, I'm financing this movie myself, and the only way I can do it is to make it in a week!' I said, 'A week?!' He said, 'Yeah!' I thought about it and thought it might be a hoot. He did it. He made a movie in a week. He lived up to his motto of 'Six days, no waiting.' Those movies are kind of fun to watch in their own light, stupid way."

Many of the actor's other films have done little to advance his career beyond his established image, even if only because they haven't been seen. *PULSEPOUNDERS*, a Lovecraftian trilogy, fell into distribution limbo due to "legal bugaboos" when Charles Band's Empire Pictures went out of business, although Combs hopes it may some day come out on video. *ROBOT JOX*, Stuart Gordon's failed at-

"I enjoy the genre, but I've always prided myself on being versatile. Yet, Hollywood likes to pigeonhole you as soon as they can, so it's a bit of a battle."

tempt at delivering a science-fiction action spectacular on a Charles Band budget, faced a similar fate, until it eventually received a brief theatrical release.

More recently, Combs has appeared in films for Band's new company, Full Moon Entertainment. In *TRANCERS II* (1991), he was reduced to playing a supporting villain alongside Martine Beswick (ironically, Bates' *SISTER HYDE* co-star), while Richard Lynch got the lead heavy role. One year later, however, Combs got to play the title character in *DR. MORDRID*, a considerable change of pace from his Herbert West persona.

"It borrows heavily from *DR. STRANGE*," Combs admits. "It was a very good experience. I enjoyed making that movie, but I just wish that I had been a little bit more involved in the creation of the character. Although I had been talking with Charlie [Band] for quite awhile, I never got to look at a script, basically, until we were about ready to go. I wish that I had, because I would have liked to have had the character be a little bit more active. He could

have used a little more humor. I found myself just standing around reacting to what everybody else was doing, as opposed to instigating things myself. That's a very difficult thing to sustain as an actor, because 'actor' implies acting—to act, be active. Just to be reacting is not the same thing. There is talk of a second one. I told Charlie, 'I just hope I'll be a little more involved, instead of standing on the sidelines a lot.' He said, 'Oh, yeah, we'll shoot you out a canon.'"

This kind of weakness on the part of protagonists is what makes the antagonists often more memorable. "Villains are always more interesting to play," Combs opines, "as Herbert West proves. When you think back on movies like *DIE HARD*, you always think of the bad guys, because they have something very strong and active to play."

Although Combs characterizes his most famous role as a villain, he admits that, as with Peter Cushing's Baron Frankenstein, there is a definite appeal to Herbert West. "He's a fascinating character," the actor states. "He's that sort of driven character that we are

Stuart Gordon (left) directs Combs (right) in *THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM*. "For me, it's Stuart getting back to his original style," says the actor.



all obsessed with. He's uncompromising—that's the way I think of it. We all compromise everyday in big and small ways. Here's a guy that we admire because, despite what we find disgusting about him, at least he doesn't give in. So we all appreciate that and root for it."

Despite his disappointment with the character, DR. MORDRID may have been the first step toward escaping the confines of low-budget villainy. Combs' most recent big-screen appearance was a scene-stealing turn last year in Stuart Gordon's *FORTRESS*, a relatively lavish science fiction prison breakout movie that proved a tremendous hit overseas if not at home. "I played a character named D-Day, sort of a frightened little ferret-like inmate, a retro-'60s kind of guy, who manages to stay out of everyone's way and survive in this hideous environment," he explains. "As the story unfolds, he turns out to be a techno-wiz and explosives expert, and he proceeds to help in a big way when Christopher Lambert devises a plan to break out. He saves the day, when it looks like all else has failed, and then dies—a heroic end. I was pleased with how it turned out. The role really builds and expands as the movie goes along."

After that Combs moved back into the horror realm, continuing his association with H.P. Lovecraft by actually playing the author in *NECRONOMICON* [see article on Page 8.] Combs calls the experience "very strange," adding, "I didn't look like myself after the incredible special effects makeup John Vulich did. The script altered him into a heroic self-sacrificing, shy, professorial, ragged-around-the-edges, puppy dog kind of guy who rises heroically to the occasion. Whereas the real Lovecraft was staid and stoic, it seems to me—a little humorless, at least in what I could glean from his pictures and writing."

Although Combs has carved himself a niche in science-fiction, fantasy, and horror, he still has a slightly uneasy feeling about his success in the field. "It's kind of a mixed blessing for an actor," he



Co-starring with Christopher Lambert (right), Combs played techno-wiz D-DAY (left) in Gordon's futuristic prison-escape movie, *FORTRESS*. "The role really builds and expands as the movie goes along," the actor enthuses.

opines. "I enjoy the genre, but you do this and they figure, 'Well, that is what he does.' It's sort of like going to a banquet—you're told you can only eat the sausage and that's all. But it's food; it's sustenance. I get the experience of being in front of the camera and getting the juices flowing, so the genre's been very good to me."

On the other hand, Combs laments, "I've always prided myself on being versatile and being able to do the classics and dramas and contemporary plays and just a plethora of styles. And yet, as far as Hollywood is concerned, they like to pigeonhole you as soon as they can. So it's been a bit of a

battle—fighting a windmill. But to put it into context, I'm working and have a bit of a following out there. Someone said to me early on that horror fans are very loyal, and I went, 'Yeah, right,' and filed it away. But it's proven to be time and time again quite true. They're avid."

Following his appearance as Lovecraft in *NECRONOMICON*, Combs has no definite plans at the moment, although his experience with *DR. MORDRID* has taught him that he'd like to be more involved in the development of his projects. "I'd like to direct, and I did send a script to Charlie Band awhile ago, but I don't know [if that

will happen]—it's easier said than done," he admits. In the meantime, "I'm an actor. You never know what could be next; you're constantly looking for some kind of project; you just keep your eyes and ears open and hope for the best."

Having branched out into science fiction and fantasy, Combs is no longer limited to low-budget splatter. Still, no matter how Combs may feel about typecasting, it seems that Fate—and the fans—have bestowed upon him the honor of being a premier genre actor for the '90s. □

Additional quotes provided by Jay Stevenson.